

President Biden's Middle East Trip Should Focus on Countering Iran

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

As President Biden prepares to visit Israel and Saudi Arabia, regional geopolitics are changing fast because of Iran's threats to Israel and Sunni Arab states.

Biden should use this trip to lay the foundations for expanded U.S.-led regional cooperation to counter Iranian aggression and help stabilize the region.

Biden must get tough on Iran, promote Israeli-Saudi rapprochement, expand the Abraham Accords, and work with partners, including Riyadh, to advance U.S. interests.

President Joe Biden's first trip to the Middle East since taking office, scheduled for July 13–16, will include two days of talks with Israeli and Palestinian leaders before traveling to Saudi Arabia for talks with Saudi leaders and a summit with nine leaders of Arab countries threatened by Iran. A top agenda item at both stops will be developing a common approach to containing and deterring Iran, which is on the threshold of becoming a nuclear weapons state. President Biden has an opportunity to organize a wide coalition of countries to counter Iranian aggression and help to stabilize the volatile Middle East.

Israel and Saudi Arabia Face a Common Threat

Biden will arrive in Israel after the fall of Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's coalition government. He

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will meet with former Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, now the leader of Israel's caretaker government until the November 1, 2022, elections. The caretaker government will not have the authority to make any major initiatives on Israeli–Palestinian issues, given their controversial nature, especially before an election. It will have much more latitude to expand regional cooperation against Iran.

The foundations for Arab–Israeli cooperation against Iran were laid by Benjamin Netanyahu's government, which conducted secret diplomatic talks with Saudi Arabia and negotiated the 2020 Abraham Accords with Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and Sudan. If Netanyahu wins the next election, as expected, he is likely to move enthusiastically to expand Arab–Israeli cooperation against Iran.

Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz signaled Jerusalem's interest in expanding security cooperation with Arab states when he announced on June 20 that Israel and the U.S. were working to establish a "Middle East Air Defense Alliance," a coalition of unnamed countries that he revealed already had staged a successful operation in defeating an Iranian drone attack.¹ Although Israeli officials have cautioned that the multilateral effort is a work in progress that does not constitute a full-blown alliance, with U.S. encouragement, it could evolve in that direction.

President Biden also is likely to promote better relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Biden will travel to the West Bank for a meeting with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Abbas, elected to a four-year term in 2005, has been in power for 17 years and canceled elections last year to maintain a firm grip on power.

Although ostensibly opposed to armed struggle and committed to a "two-state solution" in which an independent Palestinian state would be established next to Israel, Abbas's Palestinian Authority has incited terrorism against Israel and rewarded jailed terrorists by providing stipends to their families. Abbas's ineffective and corrupt rule has contributed to the eclipse of the Palestinian Authority by Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which rejects peace negotiations and seeks Israel's destruction.

A Reset for U.S. Saudi Policy

President Biden will then fly to Saudi Arabia for a July 15 meeting with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and his controversial son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, who was implicated in the 2018 murder of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi.² Prince Mohammed

is the *de facto* ruler of Saudi Arabia due to the aging king's declining health. Simply meeting with the crown prince marks a major policy reversal for Biden, who vowed as a presidential candidate to make the Saudi government "pay the price and make them in fact the pariah that they are" because of the Khashoggi murder.³

While Biden's virtue-signaling by promising to treat the prince as a pariah may have made political sense when he was a presidential candidate, as President, Biden must be careful not to undermine U.S. national interests. Saudi Arabia is a key Middle Eastern security and energy partner. President Biden's efforts to penalize the Saudis for the Khashoggi affair already have blown up in his face. In February, Prince Mohammed reportedly refused to take a phone call from the White House in which the President was expected to lobby the Saudis to increase oil exports to help offset the reduction of Russian oil exports due to a Western boycott imposed because of its invasion of Ukraine.⁴

Prince Mohammed, who is 36 years old, could rule Saudi Arabia for the next 50 years. He could play a key role in assembling a coalition to oppose Iran. The crown prince has spearheaded important reforms that have diminished the power of Muslim clerics and encouraged the emergence of a more tolerant form of Islam in Saudi Arabia, which is vital for dimming the long-term appeal of Islamist extremism. He also has initiated long-overdue reforms that have broadened the rights and opportunities of women in the kingdom.

The most important meeting of Biden's entire trip could be the July 16 summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in which the President will sit down with the leaders of the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates) as well as Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan. The summit is an opportunity to reset the Biden Administration's failing Middle East policy and take concrete steps to establish an effective regional coalition against Iran.

U.S. Policy: A Stronger Focus on Iran Needed

The principal policy focus of President Biden's trip should be urgent security issues related to Iran and its proxy network of militias and terrorist groups. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia see Iran as their archenemy, and this common concern has prompted a rethink in their policies toward each other. Riyadh is a key player in Arab and Muslim politics and can act as a catalyst in forming an anti-Iran coalition. Enlisting Saudi support would advance U.S. interests because standing up such an alliance would reduce the risks

to U.S. military forces in the region, force Tehran to pay a higher price for its aggression, and enhance the effectiveness of a U.S. military response if necessary.

To safeguard U.S. national interests in the Middle East, the Biden Administration should:

- **Get tough on Iran.** Arab states are unlikely to stand up to Iran’s intimidation tactics unless strongly backed by the U.S. The Biden Administration should become more realistic and reject returning to the flawed 2015 Iran nuclear deal. It would be dangerous to revive an illusory and inherently inadequate nuclear agreement. The Administration should return to the Trump Administration’s maximum pressure sanctions strategy and stop turning a blind eye to Iran’s illicit oil exports to China, Iran’s biggest customer. It should work with European allies to “snap back” U.N. sanctions on Iran, as permitted under the 2015 agreement. Ratcheting up sanctions on Iran could pave the way for a stronger and more restrictive nuclear deal, or at least make Tehran pay a higher price for its nuclear defiance, while undermining Iran’s military buildup and its ability to finance proxy militias that amplify its regional threats and influence.⁵
- **Encourage an Israeli–Saudi rapprochement.** Washington should seek to deepen and broaden bilateral contacts between Israel and Saudi Arabia. This would serve U.S. interests by laying the foundation for an expanded Arab–Israeli peace and clearing the way for greater regional cooperation against Iran. The White House has been quietly working with Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Egypt on a potential deal to finalize the transfer of two strategic islands in the Red Sea, Tiran and Sanafir, from Egypt to Saudi Arabia. If this mediation effort is successful, it could lead to other normalization steps such as allowing Israeli airlines to use Saudi airspace for flights to Asia. Such incremental steps help to maintain the diplomatic momentum toward an eventual peace agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, a prerequisite for standing up a robust defense alliance.
- **Push for the formation of a Middle East alliance to counter Iran.** The creation of a regional alliance against Iran has long been a U.S. goal to reduce the burdens and risks imposed on U.S. military forces and enable a U.S. pivot to the Indo-Pacific region.⁶ The building blocks of such an alliance are already in place. Egypt and Jordan, the first

Arab states to sign peace treaties with Israel, long have cooperated with Israel on security issues, and Israel has expanded its security cooperation with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco since 2020 when they signed the Abraham Accords. Washington must take the lead in standing up a formal alliance, given the sensitive nature of Saudi–Israeli security cooperation. As Israeli Defense Minister Gantz has suggested, a good place to start would be to build on the ongoing informal Israel–Bahrain–United Arab Emirates air defense coordination. This cooperation has helped to mitigate the threats posed by Iran’s drones, rockets, and missiles and can be expanded by including Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states threatened by Iran. Washington should design an integrated air defense framework for the region and sell advanced radars and air defense systems that will strengthen the security, warning time, and situational awareness of all partners.

- **Work with, not against, Saudi Arabia.** The Saudis have been key partners for the U.S. on security and energy issues for eight decades, but they have been problematic partners because of their past policies on Israel, human rights, and the export of their Wahhabi brand of Islam, which contributed to Islamist extremism around the world. Despite his autocratic rule and involvement in the Khashoggi murder, Prince Mohammed has taken important steps to reform Saudi policies on Arab–Israel issues, discourage Islamist extremism, and expand opportunities for women. Instead of publicly chastising an important partner and treating it like a pariah, the Biden Administration should adopt a more pragmatic approach toward Saudi Arabia. President Biden should not jeopardize important cooperation on countering Iran, defeating Islamist terrorism, and stabilizing energy markets⁷ by virtue-signaling on the Khashoggi issue. As bad as that horrific affair was, Iran’s outlaw regime has assassinated at least 21 political dissidents overseas and killed hundreds of foreigners in overseas bombings since its 1979 revolution.⁸
- **Strengthen and expand the Abraham Accords.** The 2020 peace agreements brokered by the Trump Administration have advanced U.S. interests by strengthening the security of U.S. allies, enabling them to cooperate more fully to mitigate Iranian threats, and reducing the risks that Israeli–Palestinian tensions will trigger another Arab–Israeli war. Saudi Arabia signaled its support for the accords by

allowing limited Israeli airline flights through its air space, but it also made it clear that there would be no normalization of relations with Israel without significant progress in Israeli–Palestinian negotiations. Such progress is unlikely anytime soon. President Abbas is not willing to make the necessary compromises to reach a peace agreement, and he does not have the power to deliver peace anyway. The inconvenient truth is that a genuine peace is impossible as long as Hamas retains a chokehold on Gaza. Rather than rush to failure on a comprehensive peace agreement, the Biden Administration should focus on incremental steps that can improve Palestinian living standards without jeopardizing Israeli security.

Conclusion

The geopolitical map of the Middle East is changing fast. Iran’s looming threats have prompted Israel and Sunni Arab states to cooperate against a common adversary, and U.S. policy changes are needed to support a regional realignment. President Biden’s trip to Israel and Saudi Arabia, Iran’s two chief regional rivals, is an excellent opportunity to lay the foundations for expanded U.S.-led regional cooperation to defeat Iranian aggression.

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Endnote

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